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ABSTRACT

Urban planners and policy makers are concerned that the image of cities conveyed to metropolitan viewers over television is predominantly negative. Locational and investment decisions may be influenced by the level of confidence inspired by such images. Television viewers perceive that their chance of experiencing violence in the city is higher than the actual risks. Television journalism may also inspire hostility toward politics and government. Positive city imagery is rare. The limited objectivity of journalism which focuses on the dramatic and unusual serves to select against positive reporting. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policy requiring licensees to ascertain community "problems" rather than "needs" may also contribute to the negative bias of community reporting. Television could contribute to the solution of the city image problem. The FCC prime time access rule provides the potential for positive public affairs programing. One program, "Jamaica Plain: Options in the City" was designed to communicate the positive aspects of life in a Boston neighborhood. Research is underway to determine the effects of the show. Available information shows positive results and gives indications that public interest programing can provide alternative images of the city for some people. (KB)

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William W. Harris

"A NICE PLACE TO VISIT, BUT..."

Television's Image of the City

Urban planners and officials are calling for a revitalization of dying American cities. There are encouraging signs--few but strong--in cities across the country. The media, a contributor to perpetuating the city's negative image--is being remobilized to combat that image.

(Public Opinion is) "...an opinion that gradually takes root among a whole people; especially among those who have the most influence when they work together as a group. In this way it wins the upper hand to such an extent that one meets it everywhere. It is an opinion that without being noticed takes possession of most heads, and even in situations where it does not dare express itself out loud it can be recognized by a louder and louder muffled murmur. It then only requires some small opening that will allow it air, and it will break out with force. Then it can change whole nations in a brief time and give whole parts of the world a new configuration."

Christof Wieland, 1798
Quoted in Democracy and Its Discontents
by Daniel J. Boorstin

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A Boston metropolitan resident today has a variety of images of the city of Boston. These images are formed by past and present experiences, as well as by the mass media.

Television, in particular, is a major source of this imagery. Recent Roper figures indicate that the average metropolitan viewer is spending more than three hours a day watching television. Of those watching, 65% will be getting most of their "news about what's going on in the world today" from television, and 36% will be relying exclusively on television as their source for the same information. Furthermore, over 50% of these viewers will be "inclined to believe" television more than the competing media.

Urban planners and policy makers have become increasingly concerned about the nature of the city's image as conveyed by television to the metropolitan viewer, and the cumulative effect of these images on the viewer's confidence in the city. While these city images may be both "positive" and "negative," the latter seem to predominate. News, public affairs, and dramatic programming all create an image which includes examples of: crime, fires, housing deterioration and abandonment, social unrest and inequities, financially failing cities, racial conflict, allegations of governmental misconduct and other institutional chicanery. The Boston area viewer is further deluged by coverage of the current school situation.

An emerging body of thought suggests that the decision of a person, household or business to remain in the city, versus moving out to the suburbs, as well as the decision of those not currently living

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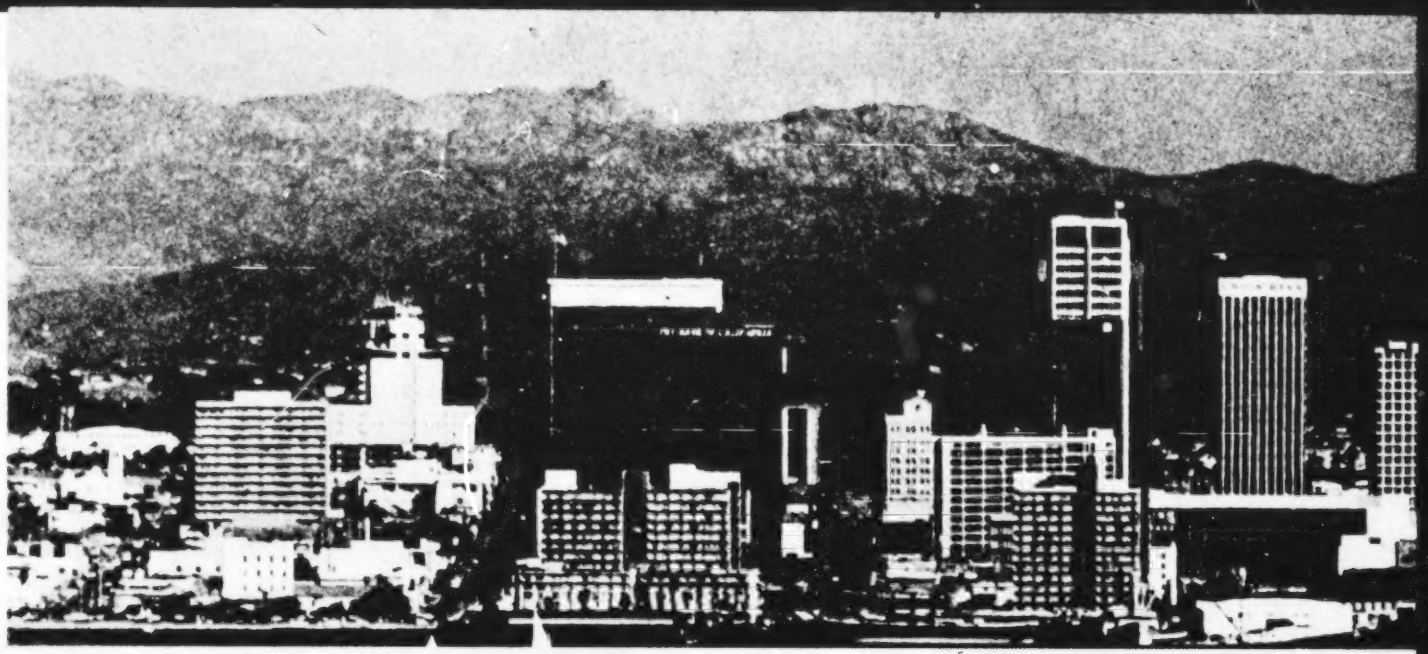


in the city to settle in the city, may hinge on how viable this city seems as a place in which to live, work and invest. The level of confidence held in the city is not the only criterion for a person's locational and investment decisions, but it is an important factor.

Two sets of actors—the people who now live, work, and invest in the city and the people who may, at some future time, decide to live, work or invest in the city—are of primary concern to city policy makers. Current economic conditions in the city require both the maintenance of the existing tax base provided by current residents and businesses, and an expansion of that tax base from new residents and businesses to offset increasing service and construction costs. This is especially crucial at a time when the impact of federal and state financial assistance appears to be diminishing.

Since a primary goal of the city is to attract and maintain these two sets of actors, urban planners and city policy makers have come to realize that the mass media will either be supportive or destructive in the accomplishment of this goal.

The media environment must be considered over time; not just in the present. There is no evidence that the nature of the television images presented in the sixties was substantially more supportive of cities than what we have today. Indeed, one might argue that the extensive media coverage of the urban riots had an even more negative and long-lasting impact on how people perceived American cities than today's media coverage. (For a "refresher" on the 1960's, I would recommend some of Charles Braverman's films culled from CBS news footage.)

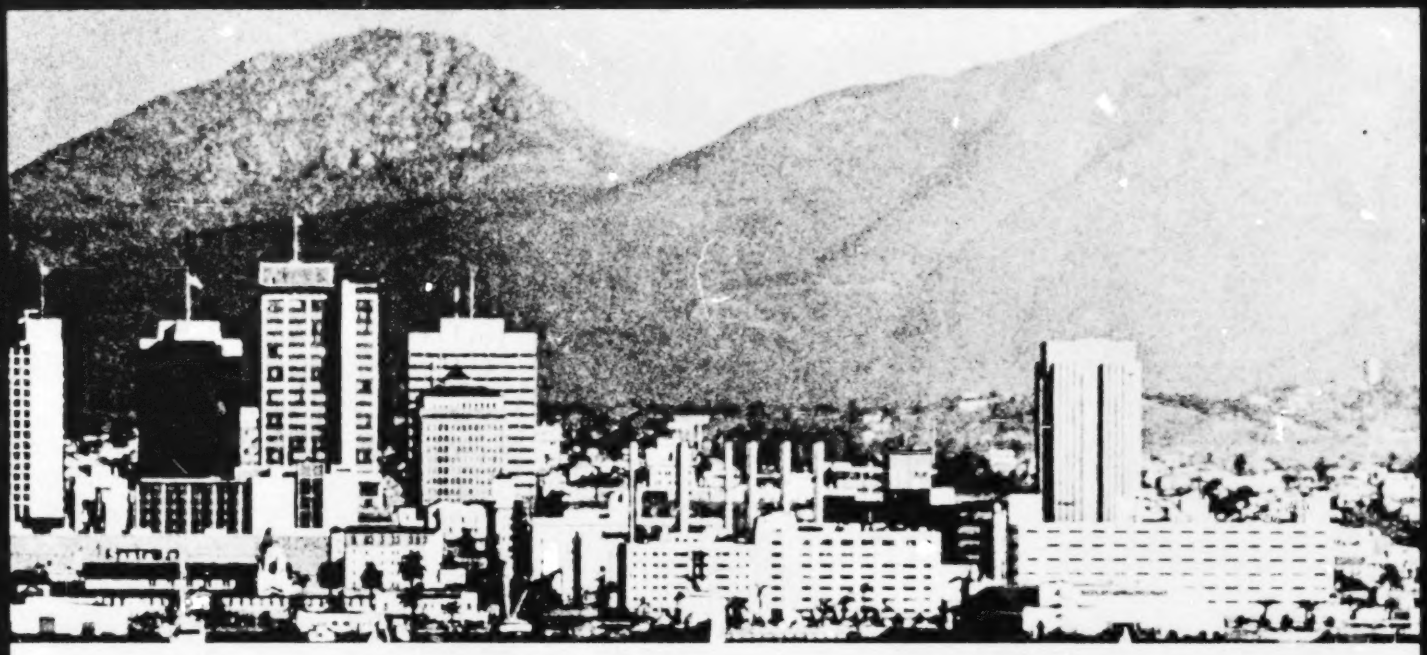
Television and other media were not alone, however, in calling attention to the negative aspects of life in the city. "Think tanks" and universities, often supported by foundations and government, conducted research on the "urban crisis" generating even more concern about the plight of cities. In addition, Great Society programs seemed to reward (with money) those areas, people, or programs that screamed the loudest while presenting the "best" cases for the "worst" conditions and despair. This attitude not only existed in the Office of Economic Opportunity; it was also evident in housing policy where, according to Rolf Goetze (Director of the Housing Revitalization Program for the Boston Redevelopment Authority), "... the federal assistance programs encouraged a negative bias in the general perception of urban neighborhoods. Distribution formulas like 'poverty counted twice' rewarded the municipalities that most effectively poor-mouthed their (housing) stock. The media and the citizenry vied in which could find more need, blight and deterioration, unwittingly broadcasting the images that urban areas were becoming disaster areas, needy of massive relief."[1]

While cities were portrayed as "disaster-areas" the outlook for suburban development seemed bright. Government and businesses turned to investment programs in the suburbs (e.g. highways, hospitals, schools and factories), often at the expense of the cities.

At the same time, television programs and commercials, directed to the young and affluent consumers, extolled the virtues of suburban life. Boston City Councilman Lawrence DiCara wrote in a *Boston Globe* editorial, "City neighborhoods have been abandoned by people advancing on the economic ladder." Considering the various incentives for living in the suburbs and the cities, one wonders if these people were "pushed" from the city or "pulled" to the suburbs.

We have little idea what effects this cumulative barrage of negative city/positive suburban imagery has had on the metropolitan viewer's confidence in the city. While we know that a large number of affluent residents and businesses have left the city in recent years, we do not know what—if any—role television may have played in their decision to leave.

Fear of crime or violence is frequently mentioned as one reason (among many) for people either leaving the city or not moving (back) to it. A principal finding of a recent Gerbner-Gross study on violence and television, reported by George Comstock, reveals, "Among viewers, amount of exposure to television was correlated positively with the holding of a belief about the likelihood of being involved in



violence which was more in accord with the depiction of the world in television drama than with statistical fact."[2]

Since a large proportion of the violence portrayed on television is urban, this finding suggests that television viewers in a metropolitan area may *perceive* that the chances of their experiencing violence in the city may be higher than the risks actually are. If this is the case, one must expect a diminution of that person's confidence in the city as a viable place in which to live, work or invest. (There is no evidence that would suggest that "positive" city image programs, e.g. *Rhoda* or *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* would balance or outweigh this consideration of fear of violence.)

In his paper, "American Political Legitimacy," Michael J. Robinson writes, "I have begun to envision a two-stage process in which television journalism, with its constant emphasis on social and political conflict, its high credibility, its powerful audio-visual capabilities and its epidemicity has caused the more vulnerable viewers first to doubt their own understanding of their political system." He continues: "But once these individuals have passed this initial stage they enter a second phase in which personal denigration continues and in which a new hostility toward politics and government also emerges."[3]

This "hostility toward politics and government" is evident in the Boston metropolitan area today and may be specifically affecting the level of confidence that people have in the City of Boston. It is difficult to imagine otherwise, given the extensive media coverage in Boston of both alleged political misconduct and the tense school situation.

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It is true that two recent entertainment series (they both have been cancelled) portrayed some positive aspects of life in Boston (*Friends and Lovers; Beacon Hill*), and that positive imagery about the city may appear occasionally in other mass media. The Boston *Herald-American*, for example, has recently begun a daily front-page insert, "Good News." While glimmers of positive city imagery appear occasionally, they are still rare.

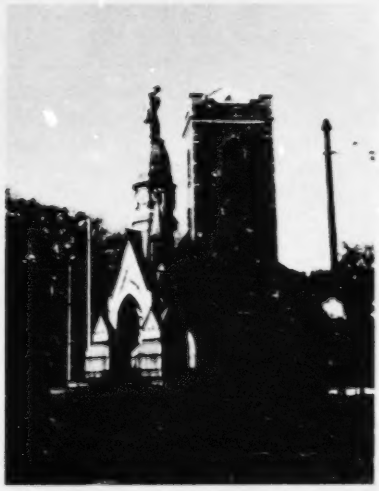
One is reminded of Judge Bazelon's words in the *Banzhaf v. FCC* case: "The mere fact that information is available, or even that it is actually heard or read, does not mean that it is effectively understood. A man who hears a hundred "yeses" for each "no," when the actual odds lie heavily the other way, cannot be realistically deemed adequately informed."

While Judge Bazelon was referring to cigarette advertising, the point is still relevant to the city confidence problem. If a viewer sees a hundred negative city images for every one positive image, is he adequately informed? What effect will this constant barrage of negative imagery have on his level of confidence in the city?

A response to these questions is suggested in a recent letter to HUD written by a Boston city official: "Neighborhood decline can be caused by information which is inaccurate, incomplete, overly-generalized from a negative perspective or poorly disseminated . . . The tendency of existing information networks to carry stories of crime, fires, high taxes, poor schools, racial conflict, etc. may cause potential property buyers not to explore options in the city which would serve the buyer's needs very well. Inadequate information also contributes to vicious circles of self-fulfilling prophecy like red-lining, block-busting, and neighborhood dis-investment."

Within the media's image-making system, the role and attitude of the

journalist is important. In the staff report, *Mass Media and Violence*, David Brinkley is quoted: ". . . placidity is not news. News is the unusual and the unexpected. If an airplane departs on time, arrives on time, it isn't news. If it crashes, regrettably, it is." Given the presumption that "attracting audiences requires conflict and drama," one can easily understand the Brinkley comment. After all, ". . . mass media are commercial enterprises, (and) content is shaped by considerations of what brings in the money."[4] If the content of television messages is shaped by these "environmental" (audience and financial) considerations, with the collaboration of a journalist who believes that "placidity is not news," it is not difficult to understand why we receive the unsettling messages about the city that we do.



"Objective reporting" is a prominent journalistic tradition. One effect of this tradition on political coverage is referred to in Timothy Crouse's Book, *The Boys on the Bus*. In it, Crouse quotes a McGovern aide (ex-journalist) who wrote in *Newsweek*, ". . . 'you can write about a candidate who is being sneaky and bumbling: that's objective reporting. But you can't write about a candidate who is being kind and forgiving: that's editorializing. Curiously limited objectivity, isn't it?'."

Consider the role that this "limited objectivity" may be playing in the audience's "hostility toward politics and government" referred to in the Robinson study.

There is no reason to believe that the standards for objective reporting in a political campaign would be greatly modified when applied to the objective reporting of cities. The staff report, *Mass Media and Violence* states, "Critics have suggested that the news media should put more emphasis on 'good news'. The profession has categorically rejected this suggestion. They have an obligation, they insist, to report events which involve conflict, the threat of violence, or actual violence."[5]

Whether it is the journalist's predilection for "objective reporting" or the television company's economic (audience) requirements, or a combination of the two, we are still left with a system that devotes much more air space to "news" than to editorials or public affairs. (In 1971, news programs as a percentage of total news and public affairs programming during two sample weeks for Boston's single-owner affiliates was 94%.)

If a television station were to reallocate some of the air space currently devoted to news to more editorial and public affairs programming, would the current situation (vis a vis negative versus positive city imagery) be different? Possibly, but it would depend upon who produced and delivered the additional editorial messages and public affairs programs.

I am not suggesting that bad news about the city should not be covered or reported to the public—nor am I recommending any interference with a journalist's freedom or his rights under the First Amendment. But, as Plato stated, the " . . . law is not concerned to make any one class specially happy, but to ensure the welfare of the commonwealth as a whole." And today's commonwealth includes the cities as well as the suburbs.

While we cannot prove that television coverage of cities is undermining people's confidence in cities, we cannot dispute the powerful influence of television. "In April 1974, *U.S. News and World Report* asked 500 U.S. 'leaders' to rate organizations and institutions 'according to the amount of influence . . . for decisions or actions affecting the nation as a whole.' TV came in first with a score of 7.2 on a scale of 1-to-10. The White House tied the Supreme Court for second place . . ."[6]

To raise the question about television's powerful influence on people's confidence in the city is not, however, to invite closer scrutiny from the Federal Communications Commission. The FCC's recent adventures in "family viewing" have raised enough questions to warrant caution in pursuing such a strategy.

Nevertheless, it may be useful to explore two current FCC policies which may have some bearing on the problem of confidence in the city:

1. In moving from a policy in 1968 which required stations to ascertain their community's "needs" to a policy in 1976 that requires licensees to ascertain their community's "problems," the FCC may have inadvertently reinforced a station's tendency to broadcast more programs on community "problems." This may simply be a matter of semantics, however, since one of the "problems" ascertained by a Boston television station in 1975 was ". . . a failure to cover positive community programs."

2. While the FCC's prime time access rule (which limited the number of prime time hours of network programming that a station could carry to three hours a night), led to an increase in the number of game shows and animal programs that appear in most markets between 7:30 and 8 o'clock p.m.; some stations have also filled this time with public affairs programming. The fact that very few of these access periods are currently filled with public affairs programs does not mean that the policy is a failure. It is the existence of the *opportunity* to use this time for different types of programming that is important.

One aspect of this project deserves particular attention. The program was produced, researched and aired under existing institutional arrangements with negligible incremental costs for any of the parties concerned. In other words, the local public affairs unit within WNAC-TV was in place; the teachers and students at Boston University were studying and researching problems about the city; the City of Boston was (and is) directly interested in revitalization strategies; and community groups in Jamaica Plain were already formed and meeting around a number of issues. This kind of collaboration may be replicable in other markets.

Despite expressed fears, stations will not necessarily lose their audiences to competitors when they provide locally-originated public affairs programming during access time. For example, a recent public affairs "special" program, *Jamaica Plain: Options in the City*, was aired by WNAC-TV (Boston) in the access period. It drew more viewers than the competing game show and was second in the market for the time period.

The *Jamaica Plain* program was the result of a variety of efforts which began in 1974. At that time, the Boston Redevelopment Authority's District Planning Program had developed a policy geared towards neighborhood stabilization and revitalization. One of the basic strategies considered important for the implementation of this policy was ". . . to preserve, build or restore

confidence for neighborhood residents."[7]

Some of the neighborhoods which had been considered relatively stable were experiencing a loss of confidence and dis-investment. Housing abandonment, while not yet a major problem in Boston, was becoming worrisome. The school controversy and the possibility of a major increase in the property tax were among the issues negatively affecting the environment.

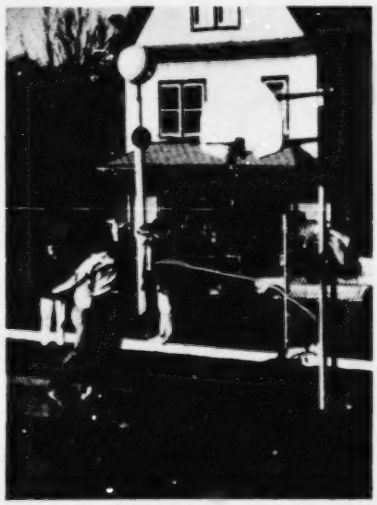
Nevertheless, while these negative indicators were present, positive signs were also evident. Not only was the Boston population stabilizing, there was also evidence of an upward trend in population, "... particularly in the 25-to-34 year old group, many of whom (were) young professionals who both worked in the City and (were) interested in the life-style and amenities the central city supports."[8] Furthermore, "... some of the oldest neighborhoods which had become seriously deteriorated—the lower side of Beacon Hill, certain sections of the Back Bay, the South End, Charlestown—(had) experienced a strong resurgence in housing demand ..."

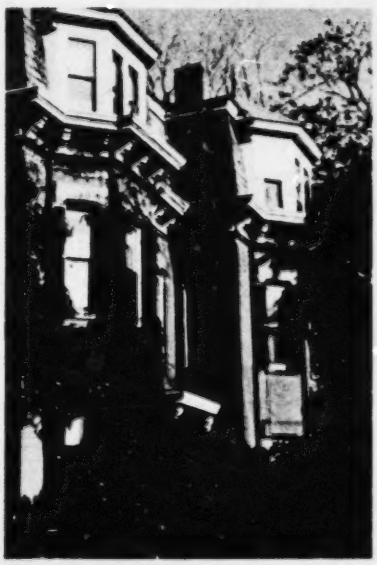
While it was conceivable that television was *not* contributing to this "loss of confidence," a number of us believed otherwise. Since we could not prove that television was a part of the problem, we sought to prove that it could be part of the solution.

It was decided to design a television program that would communicate some of the positive aspects of life in a Boston neighborhood. The program we envisioned would have two goals:

1. It should reinforce the local resident's sense of pride and/or confidence in the city, and
2. It should increase a non-city resident's knowledge of and/or interest in the possibility of moving to the city.

WNAC-TV, an RKO-CBS affiliate, agreed to cooperate in the project. There was an agreement with the station that a group of students from Boston University's Department of Urban Affairs and I would provide all research and preproduction efforts for a locally produced film documentary on a district in the city. The program would be aired by WNAC-TV during access time. While station personnel would handle all "physical" parts of the program, i.e., they would film, tape sound, edit and assemble the final program for airing, the program would be produced by the Boston University group.





The program was aired on January 6, 1976, at 7:30 p.m. on WNAC-TV. Research data on the project are still being analyzed, but some results are already available:

- The program *(Jamaica Plain: Options in the City)* had an ARB "over-night" rating of 9 and a share of 17, which placed it second in the market for the time period (1.8 viewers/set).
- Over 450 people called in for a free poster on Jamaica Plain (designed and provided by the Boston Redevelopment Authority.
- Critical reviews were favorable.
- Local television executives have expressed an interest in the concept of further collaboration with universities in designing public affairs programming.
- Local (Jamaica Plain) real estate brokers mentioned an increased interest in Jamaica Plain immediately following the program. (We traced one person who signed a purchase-and-sale agreement to buy a house in Jamaica Plain because of the program; we heard about another who decided *not* to leave Jamaica Plain on the basis of the program.)
- One local bank said that new mortgage applicants were mentioning the program immediately following its airing.

(Research is now underway analyzing the 150 post-air date questionnaires that were distributed to viewers for evaluation purposes.)

One aspect of this project deserves particular attention. The program was produced, researched and aired under existing institutional arrangements with negligible incremental costs for any of the parties concerned. In other words, the local public affairs unit within WNAC-TV was in place; the teachers and students at Boston University were studying and researching problems about the city; the City of Boston was (and is) directly interested in revitalization strategies; and community groups in Jamaica Plain were already formed and meeting around a number of issues. This kind of collaboration may be replicable in other markets.

One must ask if this kind of project is truly "in the public interest." One journalist believed that the program was a blatant propaganda effort for the Boston Redevelop-

ment Authority. Two residents of Jamaica Plain who viewed the program, however, responded differently:

"If people on television (not your show) and in the newspaper would stop being so negative about the city, this city would live."

"Programs like *Jamaica Plain* are an example of what TV should be: TV should be educational and informative. Also, one hears so many negative comments concerning the city; i.e., crime, violence, etc. It is good to show some positive aspects, that cities are not dying but are a viable and exciting places (sic) to live."

For several years Mark Goldman, an instructor in urban studies at the University of Buffalo, has been interested in urban neighborhoods: their physical, social, economic, political and cultural structure and composition. Dan Healy, a producer-director at WNED/TV in Buffalo, that city's public television station, has had similar interests. In the summer of 1975 they teamed up to make a documentary about one of Buffalo's oldest and most interesting neighborhoods: Black Rock.

Goldman, convinced that the decline of urban neighborhoods everywhere was due as much to public policy as to larger, historical forces, was eager to tell his story to the people of Buffalo, many of whom still lived in ancestral urban enclaves. Healy, a strong believer in the truly educational function of public television, was also eager to turn his cameras on the city, a subject long ignored by public television stations, many of which seemed far more interested in the BBC than in the local scene.

Rather than chronicle the usual litany of problems that afflict neighborhoods in all American cities, WNED's Black Rock show emphasized the positive, reinforcing aspects of life in Black Rock. The subject of the show, aired in October, 1975, was that in spite of perverse and destructive federal, state and local policies, Black Rock retains a strong sense of community identity, a deep tie to its past and a vigorous commitment to the future.

Goldman and Healy strongly believe that television—both public and commercial—plays a major role in the formulation of attitudes and policy towards the city. For too long both have been negative. Perhaps by taking a new look at our cities, television can help to foster more positive attitudes about what is good for them.

The *Jamaica Plain* program has given us some small evidence that "public interest" programming can provide alternative images of the city for some people. Since the survival and vitality of our cities are essential to the well-being of our society, it is time for those involved in making and communicating television images about the city to reconsider a line from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

"Good, the more communicated, more abundant grows."

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(Photos of Jamaica Plain courtesy of Boston Redevelopment Authority.)

***William W. Harris** is a doctoral student in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and teaches at Boston University. This article is an adaptation of Mr. Harris's presentation at the Fourth Annual Telecommunications Policy Research Conference, held in April of this year. In addition to producing* Jamaica Plain: Options in the City, *he has produced several films and television programs for both public and commercial television.*